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The Teaching Methodology of Arabic Speaking Skills: Learners' Perspectives

Sueraya Che Haron[1]

[1] Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Correspondence: Sueraya Che Haron, Institute of Education, International University Malaysia, P. O. Box 10, Kuala Lumpu 50728, Malaysia. Tel: 60-361-965-340/60-192-899-086. E-mail: sueraya@iium.edu.my

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Abstract

Teaching methodology plays an important role in transmitting knowledge and skills to learners. The effectiveness of both knowledge and skills depends greatly on the methodology used. This paper describes a study to investigate the learners' perspectives on the teaching methodology used by the teachers at the Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia, to teach Arabic speaking skills. The data were collected using a focus group interview with 6 Arabic language learners at the centre. The findings show that the learners were dissatisfied with the teaching methodology as it emphasizes memorization. Instead they prefer a communicative approach where they can apply orally what they have learned, be corrected and improve.

Keywords: speaking skill, Arabic language, second language acquisition, teaching methodology, language learning

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that Malay learners of Arabic, in general, exhibit weak Arabic speaking skills despite spending years of learning the language (Tarmizi, 1997; Ismail, 1999; Anida, 2003; Amilrudin, 2003; Khalid, 2004; Mohd. Zaidi, 2005; Zawawi, Mohd. Sukki, Alif Redzuan and Sanimah, 2005; Siti Ikbal, 2006; Mat Taib, 2006). These studies also revealed that methodologies like reading, translation, and memorization remain popular in the teaching and learning of the Arabic language in schools and higher learning institutions. Mat Taib (2006) asserts that despite better facilities and materials, improved curriculum, more qualified and trained teachers, especially in the government schools, the problem worsens. The teaching and learning of the Arabic language in Malaysia focus inordinately on the communicative and religious aspects (Zawawi et al., 2005). According to Lazim (2000) the communicative domain is clearly evident in the objectives of the Arabic language curriculum. However, this is not transparent in practice, as observed by some scholars. Tarmizi (1997), for example, discovered that there was little pedagogical difference in strategies of teaching the Arabic language, on the one hand, and Communicative Arabic Language, on the other, in three government religious secondary schools (SMKA) located in Selangor. Traditional methodologies such as memorization, reading and grammar-translation, were also conflated with the teaching of Communicative Arabic Language, as observed by Anida (2003) and Khalid (2004). Later studies have tried to explain this curious incongruity. One such attempt is by Siti Ikbal (2006) who claimed that all subjects in Arabic, including the Communicative Arabic Language, were not designed to serve communicative purposes. The focus has always been to understand Arabic grammar and comprehension. Students were only exposed indirectly to Arabic speaking during other lessons like *Insya'* (Essay writing) and *Mutola^{c}ah* (comprehension). On top of that, speaking skill was not assessed orally in the exam, even though it was included in the Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR). Furthermore, the time allocated for teaching Communicative Arabic language was limited (Siti Ikbal, 2006; Anida, 2003; Khalid, 2004). It is a commonly held belief among teachers that using the communicative approach will impede the teaching pace and delay the completion of the syllabus (Siti Ikbal, 2006). Understandably, it is almost impossible to vary the teaching methodologies, given the time constraint (Anida, 2003; Khalid, 2004). To compound the issue, during the Communicative Arabic Language lesson, the Malay Language was predominantly used (Siti Ikbal, 2006; Mustafa, 2004). Both researchers suggest that such practice was due to the teachers' poor command of Arabic speaking skill. It is no surprise, then, given all these factors, that teachers will obviously face difficulties in trying to teach the Arabic Language or Communicative Arabic Language lessons communicatively. Admittedly,

some teachers did spend efforts to make the lessons more interactive and encourage students' participation. However, the percentage was less than 10% (Mustafa, 2004). Lazim (2000) and Mat Taib (2006) concluded that the teaching of the Arabic language in Malaysia was not congruent with the objectives. Lazim (2000) was convinced that the current practice cannot realize the communicative domain as stated in the objectives. Mat Taib (2006), on the other hand, suggested the use of communicative, functional and religious approaches, replacing the current modalities to encourage students to acquire communicative competence through continuous practice in the classroom.

1.1 The Goals of Language Learning

According to National Capital Language Resource Center of the United States (NCLRC) the idea of foreign language teaching and learning in the United States, including the Arabic language, is to accomplish communication goals. In other words, the "desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, *not* the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does". Communicative competence includes "knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions, knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants, knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts and knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge" (Richards, 2006: 2). Therefore it is crucial for language teachers and learners to be able to distinguish between learning a language and learning about the language. Language learning is defined as "becoming able to use it to comprehend, communicate, and think - as they do in their first language" (NCLRC). It further states that "when learners think of the language like any other school subject, they may learn a great deal about its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and discourse structure, but the language will not become a true medium of communication for them and will not engage them very deeply" (NCLRC). In addition, the teachers and learners also need to recognize that "interpretive skills (listening, reading) develop much more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing), and the ability that students covet most; the ability to speak the second language fluently requires the longest period of growth" (NCLRC). Teaching methodology employed in the classroom should be able to develop this skill in line with other language skills. However Ellis, (1994: 228) stated that "in most cases classroom learners often fail to develop much functional language ability." Lightbown and Spada (2002: 91) explained that "formal learning takes place through conscious attention to rules and principles and greater emphasis is placed on mastery of the subject matter that was treated as a decontextualized body of knowledge" (Ellis, 1994: 214). In addition Lightbown and Spada (2002: 92) said the "teacher's goal is to see to it that students learn the vocabulary and grammatical rules of the target language" and "the goal of learners in such courses is often to pass an examination rather than to use the language for daily communicative interaction." These scenarios have been observed by Bygate as he mentioned that "one of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language" (Bygate, 1987: 3). He suggested that teachers must understand the goals of language teaching and learning properly, know what it takes to achieve the desired goals and prepare the language course accordingly to ensure the goals become reality. In addition teachers should be able to understand the effects of the methodology used. There comes the importance of this study for it provides feedbacks about the effectiveness of the teaching methodology used from the learners perspectives.

1.2 Teaching Methodologies for the Speaking Skills

Methodologists have been researching about effective methodologies for speaking skills since 1970s. Classic communicative language teaching began to spread in 1970s to 1990s replacing traditional approaches which put its centrality on grammar. During this particular phase attention shifted to gaining communicative competence. It is argued that language learning is more than gaining grammatical competence but knowledge and skills are needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes. Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) was accepted with enthusiasm in 1970s and 1980s (Richard, 2006). As time passes by more and more communicative methodologies were introduced to improve the existing ones. Among the methodologies proposed was by Rivers and Temperley (1978, as cited in Bygate, 1987). They stated that in learning to communicate there are two skills involved namely skill getting and skill using. In their framework 'skill using' or the ability to use the language functionally is clearly more important. However learners need to have skill getting as the basic for communication. Therefore they suggested pseudo communication activities to bridge the skill getting and skill using. Skill getting involves developing knowledge about the language. At this stage learners are trained to perceive the units, categories functions and internalize the rules relating categories and function, practice the sequence of sounds and start to formulate the communication. For an introduction, they suggested that learners be given exercises on grammar such as blank filling and various kinds of syntactic manipulation to help them use of grammatical structures and apply the

various grammatical rules in sentences. While building the basic for communication learners need to perform a lot of activities such as dialogue techniques, brief oral reports consisting of four to five sentences and gapped dialogues that can be done in group work to lead into spontaneous communication. The main point is that the content of these activities is structured by the learning situation and not springing from the learners autonomously. Later learners need to develop skill using where the real communication takes place. At this stage learners are trained to translate personal meanings into language where they learn to express themselves using all language elements at their disposal. Therefore learners' progress depends greatly on how daring they are in using linguistic innovation. The activities suggested demand learners to express themselves autonomously and freely such as in greetings, apologies, complaints, reporting, speaking about hobbies, TV programmes, and so on. Rivers and Temperley designed the activities to cover three basic elements of speaking skills namely oral practice for the learning of grammar, structured interaction, and autonomous interaction. In 1981 Littlewood suggested a methodology which was considered close to the earlier methodology proposed by Rivers and Temperley (1978). His framework consists of two types of activities namely pre communicative activities and communicative activities. The purpose of the pre communicative activities is mainly to prepare learners for the second type of activities. Pre communicative activities is divided into structural activities; where learners are trained to practice certain knowledge or skills specified by teachers focusing on the grammatical system of language as well as linguistic skills and quasi communicative where learners are involved in typical conversational exchanges including drills, dialogues and so on. Similar to Rivers and Temperley's views, the idea is to enable learners to relate forms to communicative functions, specific functions and social functions. In other words learners are given 'part skills' of communication to be practiced. As for the second type of activities; communicative activities, the main concern is communicating meanings. Learners are required to integrate the knowledge and skills practiced in the first activities into the full activities of communicating meanings. It is divided into functional communication activities and social interaction activities. In the functional communicative activities learners are trained using the language to express and convey meanings as effectively as possible. As for the social interaction activities learners are trained to use the language in a wider variety of social situations and relationship. The activities are similar to those in functional communication activities except they have clearly defined social context. Similarly Bygate (1987) proposed that learners need to have motor perceptive skill and interaction skill. The first skill is needed to perceive, recall and articulate in the correct order sounds and structures of the language. As for the second skill, it is needed to use the knowledge about the language and motor perceptive skill to perform a communication. In conclusion it is noticeable that all methodologists address both forms and functions of the language. Functions are undoubtedly the aim of language learning. However forms are needed to ensure effective and accurate use of functions. It is also apparent that the methodologists never separate the learning of forms and functions as they are connected with various activities.

2. Research Questions

1) How does the learner perceive Arabic speaking skills?
2) How is Arabic speaking skills taught at the IIUM?
3) How does the learner view the teaching methodology of Arabic speaking skill at the IIUM?
4) How can the current teaching methodology be improved from the learner's perspective?

3. Methods

The researcher has conducted a focus group interview with six Arabic language learners. The focused group interview was selected to increase the amount and range of data by collecting from several people at the same time. In addition, the focus group interview supports the reluctant individual by stimulating the participants' thoughts and comments and empowers them to make contributions in their own words. For this study, the researcher has decided to choose six participants only. Such group size is chosen to consider the researcher's time, financial, and her capability to carry out the investigation. Robson (2002) states that opinion varies on the optimum size of the group. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, as cited in Robson, 2002: 285) "figures eight to twelve are usually thought suitable, although smaller group sizes have been used."

4. Procedures

4.1 Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted to garner an information-rich sample. The core criteria for the participants were identified prior to selecting the matching target group. Primarily, the learner should be a Malay student currently enrolled at the IIUM. The person should have taken the Arabic speaking skills course offered at the Centre for

Foundation Studies (CFS). The rationale for selecting specifically Malay learners of Arabic is to enable the researcher to investigate the views of non-native speakers on the experience of learning Arabic speaking skills. Native speakers of Arabic or those brought up in Arabic-speaking countries, like the Middle East, may have better Arabic speaking skills and therefore might obfuscate the purpose of the research.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

For this study the researcher has decided to use semi structured interview for data collection. The interview session with six participants lasted for an hour and a half. To ensure the smooth running of the interview, the researcher has provided beforehand an interview guide for herself. Even though the interview was semi structured, the interview guide was prepared to be highly structured. It contained very specific questions that the researcher intended to ask listed in particular order followed with follow up questions and probes. According to Merriam (1998: 82) "an investigator new to collecting data through interviews will feel more confident with a structured interview format where most, if not all, questions are written out ahead of time in the interview guide." The interviews were audio-recorded and the data collected were then transcribed verbatim into texts and coded manually to arrive at the main ideas and themes. The researcher began the analysis of the data by using the transcriptions of the verbal information from the interviews recorded as the body of material for content analysis. The main ideas were then transferred into the coding template to be coded and assigned themes.

4.3 Validation Strategies

For this study, the researcher adopted 2 validation strategies; a) member checking and b) peer examination. This is justifiably adequate, as Creswell (2000) recommends that researchers engage in at least two of those validation strategies. After the data analysis, the researchers proceeded with the member checking procedure, whereby they took the tentative result back to the participants, asking for their reviews, to check if the manifest ideas and themes corresponded to their initial utterances during the interviews. The necessary modifications were then made after the exercise. A peer examination procedure followed next, whereby two colleagues who were well-experienced in teaching the Arabic Language, were instructed to recheck and provide comments on the main ideas and themes that emerged. Both colleagues concurred with all the main ideas and themes, but, nevertheless, one of them suggested several new themes to replace the existing ones and advised the researcher to elaborate in detail the meaning of each theme in the report.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Student's Perception of Arabic Speaking Skills

All learners viewed Arabic speaking skill as a pre-requisite to speaking the Arabic language, to understand Arabic conversation and to participate in the conversation. They further elaborated that the skill prepares the learners to communicate with Arabs in their career, to socialize with Arabs during visits to Arab countries. They stressed that without proper skills learners would find it difficult to communicate with the Arabs, thus creating a gap between them. The findings show that the learners demonstrated proper understanding and presented clear views on the expected outcomes of Arabic speaking skill and understood the idea of learning FL/L2, that is, to accomplish communication goals. According to the National Capital Language Resource Center of the United States [NCLRC], (2009), the "desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, *not* the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does". Similarly Bygate (1987) says that FL teaching is to prepare the learners to be able to use the language. He further stresses that learners should be able to speak confidently in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions.

The learners explained that Arabic speaking skills should not be taught as an independent subject. In fact it should be integrated with other Arabic lessons such as Arabic syntax, Arabic morphology and so on. These Arabic lessons provide learners with essential contents of the Arabic language, for example, grammar, vocabularies, and so on. As for Arabic speaking skill, it prepares learners with skills to apply those contents in speaking. In other words they are interdependent. So in order to be good speakers of Arabic, language learners should be able to master both Arabic speaking skills as well as other Arabic lessons. Bygate (1987) affirms these ideas, as he states that there are other things involved in speaking, namely knowledge of what to speak. He further elaborates that speaking skill comprises two elements: oral as well as interaction skills. The former cannot stand alone as analogically it is like learning to drive without ever going out on the road. The oral skill refers to the 'content' meant by the student. It includes the grammar, vocabulary, and so on. The interaction skill, however, refers to the skill of using those contents in speaking; for example, how to address different kinds of people, how and where to use certain terms and phrases, and so on. In sum, speaking requires knowledge and skills.

The learners wished to improve their self-confidence after completing the Arabic speaking skill course at the Centre. Unfortunately, the objectives were not fully achieved due to time constraint. The time allocated for the Arabic speaking skill course is only 3-6 hours a week. In fact, the problem of time constraint is not new, as it happens in almost every school. Siti Ikbal (2006), Anida (2003) and Khalid (2004) reported that the time allocated for teaching Communicative Arabic Language at schools was limited. Teachers believed that using the communicative approach will hamper the teaching pace and delay the completion of the syllabus (Siti Ikbal, 2006). In a limited time, it was impossible to vary the teaching methodologies (Anida, 2003; Khalid, 2004). Therefore, the learners suggested approaching Arab students in the campus, lecturers or friends learning the Arabic language, to practice speaking Arabic. In addition, the Malay learners should read more Arabic books, magazines, and listen to Arabic sermons. They unanimously believed that outside classroom practices would heighten the learners' self-confidence, increase their stock of vocabulary, and help Arabic language learners become fluent and proficient Arabic speakers.

5.2 The Teaching Methodology of Arabic Speaking Skills

The learners unanimously viewed the teaching methodology of Arabic speaking skills at the Centre as ineffective. This is because it emphasizes memorization the most in speaking practice. The elements of spontaneity, freedom, creativity in speaking were given little consideration. The learners complained that the lecturer starts the lesson by explaining the text, for example the meaning of the text and the translation of new or difficult words. The students are then required to go through the text with the lecturer, and they will be given some time to memorize the text. Normally, in the next class they are required to present what they have memorized in the previous class. The number of pages, the nature of the text, and the topic of the text vary from time to time. Usually the text consists of 1-2 pages, and the students are required to present individually. However, if the text is in the form of a dialogue, then it requires 2 or more students to present it. Students are reported to be scared of committing mistakes or forgetting the text during the presentation as their marks will be deducted. It is true that memorization is a popular method of teaching and learning the Arabic language. In fact, this traditional method is considered as the foundation to understand Arabic texts. However, studies have shown that different subject matters demand different teaching methodologies. According to Abdul Karim (1992), language is a skill that is acquired through listening and constant practice. It should be noted that there is a difference between knowledge and skill. Bygate (1987) stresses that a fundamental difference is that while both can be understood and memorized, only a skill can be imitated and practiced. Memorization is, indeed, a very useful method. However, for long-term retention and recall, it might be less effective. Finicohiaro and Brumfit (1983) stress that the speaking skill class should promote spontaneous dialogues and discussions, preferably those that have communicative values and require no memorization. If possible, translation to the first language should be strictly avoided, and students should try speaking in the second language from the beginning.

The learners stressed that the teaching of Arabic speaking skills should allow the students to apply what they have learned in other Arabic courses such as grammar, vocabulary and so on. The learners also stressed that lecturers teaching Arabic speaking skills should listen and correct the erroneous language spoken by the learners, rather than listening to their memorization. One cannot expect the Arabic language spoken by the Malay learners to be free from grammatical errors or nicely expressed, like native speakers. The influence of the Malay language and culture of communication is inevitable. The learners emphasized that the correction made in public is even more effective than in private.

They believed that the role of teachers teaching the Arabic speaking skills course should be different. The teacher should be willing to change his role into a facilitator instead of a teacher or instructor. A communicative teacher requires extra-ordinary abilities: multi-dimensional, confident and judicious. In addition to that, the lesson should be learner-centered. Everything in the lesson from planning, deciding, and participating, should involve students. Pertaining to the text used, it could be a resource for interaction rather than merely for reading, translating, and memorizing. Littlewood (1981) refers to this as non-linguistic reality. Teacher and students may use the text as an object of discussion. Students may discuss the content, the interesting as well as not-so-interesting parts, the characters available in the text, the weakness and the strength of the writing, and so on. The text could be used as a material, but the way it is used should be more communicative and interactive.

5.3 Learners Views on Teaching Methodology of Arabic Speaking Skill

The learners dissatisfied with the teaching methodology employed by the teachers to teach Arabic speaking skills, claimed they are ineffective, irrelevant and inappropriate. They stressed that the teaching of Arabic speaking skills should be done communicatively to gain the communication skills and not by means of memorization. The learners claimed that the knowledge and skills gained from the Arabic speaking skills course were mostly

receptive rather than productive. They further explained that learners should be given the opportunity to speak freely about any topic of their interest. Specifying what they have to talk may limit the development of their speaking skills. As mentioned earlier the learners again stressed the importance of applying what they have learned in other Arabic subjects. They explained that learners already have some basis for speaking Arabic as they have collected vocabulary and learned grammar through Arabic reading skills, Arabic syntax, Arabic morphology and so on. Therefore the Arabic speaking skills course should provide an opportunity for the learners to apply those contents orally and to be corrected and further improved. They also unanimously suggested the inclusion of Arabic speaking skill lesson in every Arabic language course. They suggested that any Arabic language course should allocate about 10 minutes for Arabic speaking practice, preferably in the beginning. In this way learners will get used to Arabic speaking, gain more confidence to speak Arabic, increase vocabulary and improve the language through corrections by friends and lecturers.

5.4 Ways to Improve the Present Methodology According to the Student's Perspective

In the learners' opinion, the teaching of Arabic language, in general, or Arabic speaking skills, in particular, for non-native speakers like them, should be done communicatively. They suggested the allocation of about ten minutes before the commencement of any Arabic class to practice Arabic speaking. Learners should be introduced to new vocabularies and they should be allowed to use the vocabularies in their conversation as they wish. In other words, they should be given total freedom to apply those vocabularies in their conversation. Sometimes learners should be assigned a topic and they should speak about the topic as they want. Teachers and senior students should observe the learners speech and make corrections wherever necessary. Learners should improve their speech after that. This activity should be done on a daily basis. However, the learners did not deny the strength of the present practice at the Centre. Even though the present methodology emphasizes memorization, the learners claimed that they could benefit from the texts used. Nice phrases and sentences from the text could be adopted by the students to beautify their speech. For that reason, the learners suggested the combination of both, the present methodology practiced by the Centre and the communicative approach. They stressed that the communicative approach is necessary to train the learners using the language functionally. This method is characterized by Littlewood (1981) as relating the language structure to communicative function, relating language to specific meanings, and relating language to social context. By this, for sure it will fulfill the needs of the students and the society.

6. Discussion

From the findings and the literature it could be concluded that the teaching methodology of Arabic speaking skill practiced by the majority of Arabic teachers in Malaysia, is incongruent with the nature of the course. Teachers seem to be unaware of the course objectives and expected outcomes of the course. By looking to the way the speaking skill class was conducted it could be concluded that teachers are ignorant of the goals of language learning and how to go about designing suitable activities for the speaking skills class. Traditional methods such as memorization are still widely used with little modification to suit the speaking skills class. This is surely not helpful to train the learners to speak Arabic; what more to provide an Arabic speaking environment for the learners. Teachers are still dominating the class as usual and learners are bound to what is assigned by the teachers. However, this does not mean teachers should be merely passive observers. Their presence helps students in many ways, for example, supporting students psychologically, improving students' language, resolving any conflicts, identifying students' strengths and weaknesses, and planning relevant ways to solve the problems. The way learners are required to express themselves during the presentation is totally contradict to the suggestion proposed by the communicative language teaching where learners are trained to give the most original expressions from themselves using what they have learned.

The learners' preference of the best teaching methodology for Arabic speaking skills is best described as the communicative approach. The use of the communicative approach in teaching the Arabic language was also emphasized by Mat Taib (2006). He said that the current practice of teaching Arabic speaking skills should be replaced by communicative, functional and religious approaches to encourage students to acquire communicative competence through continuous practices in the classroom. In the communicative classroom the goal is to have one's students become communicatively competent (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Therefore the nature of learning highly involves students' participation. This approach views language as a form of communication. Linguistic competence, the knowledge of forms and meanings is, however, just one part of communicative competence. Therefore the learner needs knowledge of forms, and meanings, and functions (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

7. Conclusion

It is important to know the effectiveness of a teaching methodology and one of the ways is by asking learners themselves for they are directly affected by it. Learners are able to express their opinions on the strengths and weakness of any methodology by assessing their performance in that particular course. Therefore teachers should take the feedbacks into serious consideration to improve the teaching methodology and enhance learners' Arabic speaking skills.

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